

Message Text

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SUBJECT: AIR JAMAICA STRIKE AND STRANDED AMERICANS: AUGUST 26-31, 1978

REF: KINGSTON 6884 AND PREVIOUS

1. AT NOON ON AUGUST 26, AIR JAMAICA GROUND CREWS AND STEWARDESSES WENT ON STRIKE OVER A SALARY DISPUTE, LEAVING AN ESTIMATED 2,000 AMERICAN CITIZENS STRANDED ON THE NORTH COAST AND IN KINGSTON.

2. THE EMBASSY BECAME INVOLVED ON AUGUST 27 WHEN WE RECEIVED CALLS FOR ASSISTANCE FROM TOURISTS ON THE NORTH COAST. THE CALLERS REPRESENTED GROUPS OF FROM 30 TO 600 PERSON. THEY INDICATED THAT AIR JAMAICA HAD ANNOUNCED THAT IT WOULD MAKE NO PAYMENTS FOR LODGING AND FOOD BEYOND NOON OF THAT DAY; THE CALLERS INDICATED THAT MANY MEMBERS OF THE GROUPS WERE OUT OF FUNDS AND HAD NO PLACE TO GO. EVENTUALLY, THE EMBASSY WAS ABLE TO REACH A CABINET MINISTER WHO GOT AIR JAMAICA TO RECONSIDER; AS A RESULT, THE AIRLINE CONTINUED TO PAY STRANDED GUESTS' HOTEL BILLS.

3. THE NEXT STEP WAS TO OBTAIN PLANES TO FERRY AMERICANS TO MIAMI, WHERE THEY COULD ARRANGE ONGOING FLIGHTS. AS YET (SATURDAY), AIR JAMAICA WAS DOING NOTHING ABOUT CHARTER FLIGHTS. WE THEN
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CONTACTED EASTERN AIRLINES WHOSE MIAMI OFFICE STATED IT WAS TRYING TO ARRANGE CHARTER FLIGHTS THROUGH AIR FLORIDA. AIR FLORIDA SPOKESMEN STATED THEY NEEDED EMERGENCY FLIGHT CLEARANCES OVER CUBA; THEY REQUESTED OUR ASSISTANCE IN OBTAINING THESE CLEARANCES FROM HAVANA. IN THE MEANTIME, AIR FLORIDA SENT TWO SPECIAL CHARTER FLIGHTS UNDER CAYMAN AIRWAYS; THEY INDICATED THAT THEY WOULD NOT CONTINUE IN THIS MANNER BECAUSE OF THE

ADMINISTRATIVE AND LEGAL PROBLEMS IT MIGHT CAUSE. DUE TO THE GOOD WORK OF THE INTEREST SECTION IN HAVANA, FLIGHT CLEARANCES FOR AIR FLORIDA WERE OBTAINED BY THE MORNING OF AUGUST 28.

4. AIR FLORIDA MADE SEVERAL FLIGHTS, WITH EASTERN AIRLINES HELPING ON GROUND ARRANGEMENTS. IN THE MEANTIME, THE EMBASSY COORDINATED OTHER DETAILS WITH THE OFFICE OF THE JAMAICA TOURIST BOARD IN MONTEGO BAY: CHARTER ARRIVAL AND DEPARTURE TIMES, AND NOTIFICATION OF HOTELS. ONCE WE KNEW FLIGHTS WERE COMING IN, WE CONTACTED AMERICAN CITIZENS WHO HAD CALLED US TO RELAY INFORMATION.

5. ON SUNDAY, AUGUST 27, AIR JAMAICA FINALLY BEGAN TO ARRANGE CHARTER FLIGHTS. AIR FLORIDA AND OTHER AMERICAN FLAG CARRIERS WERE PRESSED INTO SERVICE. EASTERN AIRLINES BOWED OUT AS AIR JAMAICA TOOK OVER ALL COORDINATION EFFORTS, RUNNING FROM FOUR TO EIGHT CHARTERS PER DAY THROUGH THE EVENING OF AUGUST 30, WHEN STRIKING WORKERS WERE ORDERED BACK TO WORK AND AIR JAMAICA RESUMED A NORMAL SCHEDULE. APPROXIMATELY 3,800 PEOPLE WERE RETURNED TO THE UNITED STATES BY CHARTER FLIGHTS BEFORE THE NORMAL SCHEDULE WAS REINSTATED. THIS NUMBER INCLUDED MANY WHO WERE NOT AMERICAN CITIZENS.

6. IN SUMMARY, THE QUICK ACTION OF THE EMBASSY GOT AIR JAMAICA TO RESCIND ITS DECISION TO STOP PAYMENT OF HOTEL BILLS 24 HOURS AFTER THE STRIKE BEGAN. FURTHERMORE, THE EMBASSY HELPED FACILITATE THE FIRST EIGHT CHARTER FLIGHTS BY AIR FLORIDA AT A LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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TIME WHEN AIR JAMAICA WAS DOING NOTHING, EMBASSY COORDINATION OF THESE MATTERS ENABLED MANY AMERICANS TO DEPART MUCH SOONER THAN WOULD HAVE BEEN POSSIBLE OTHERWISE.
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